

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

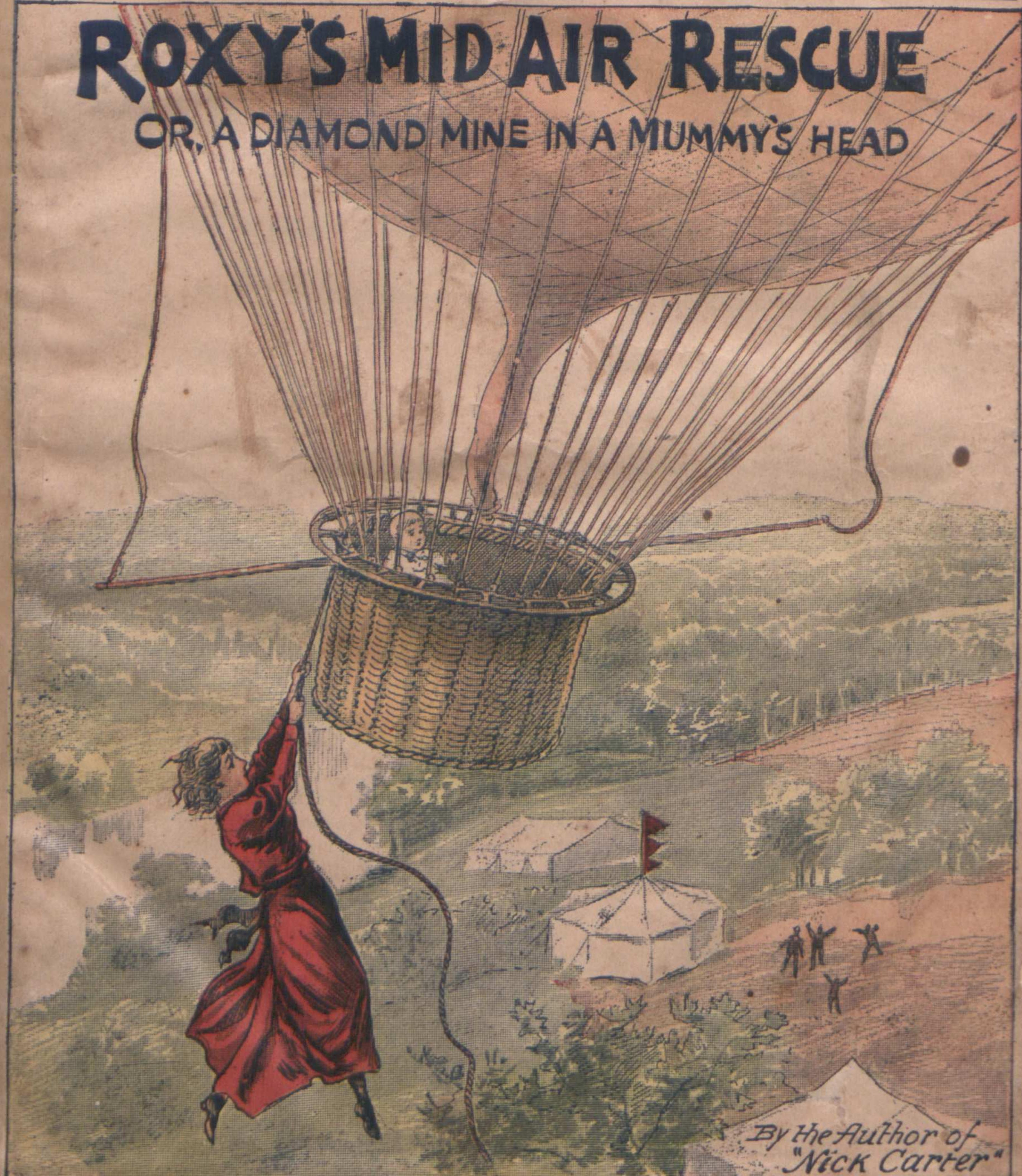
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ROXY'S MID-AIR RESCUE OR, A DIAMOND MINE IN A MUMMY'S HEAD



By the Author of
"Nick Carter"

ROXY, NICK CARTER'S GIRL DETECTIVE, WAS NOW A LIVING ANCHOR TO THE STAR-SAILING AIRSHIP.

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OR,

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By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

"WHOOPING IT UP."

"Riverdale!"

"Neverfail!"

Bang! bang! bang!

The stirring college call rang out with ear-splitting echoes to a new variation.

A chorus of distracting shots took the place of the usual and familiar—

"Rah! 'rah! 'rah!"

All Riverdale Academy was trooping the town common just beyond the school limits.

A jolly sight was the result of a half-day vacation.

About every circus or other traveling show on the road made it a point to include the lively college town in its route.

The fourth or fifth one of the season had pitched its tents that day.

The up-to-date students were "doing" it in characteristic style.

They "raa" everything—or imagined they did.

They had just given an ovation to the "one and only man with the iron arm."

Everything was inferior, and they had made sport of it.

The circus had turned out a sell, the menagerie cheap, but the irresistible crowd

had as much fun guying as if meritorious entertainment had been the rule.

They had complimented the ten thousand dollar beauty till she broke down, and got the Ceylonese Twins so jealous of one another that they became engaged in a regular scrapping match.

A shooting gallery had set the pace for clamor, and the boys had made the air ring with cowboy recklessness as the strong-arm curio began his exhibition.

Nick Carter's crack pupils, Bob Ferret, Jack Burton and Buff Hutchinson—still posing at the academy as students—were with the animated group for all they were worth.

"There's your model, Jack," nudged Bob, directing an eye at the platform holding "the modern Samson."

"Yes, that will interest you, surely—quite in your line, you know," added Buff.

"I hope not!" muttered the young athlete, as "a two-hundred pound dumbbell" was lifted up by the performer, and a staring yawp nearly dislocated his jaw goggling at the wondrous feat.

"A fake?"

"Yes, and there's a fellow who is onto it."

BE PATRIOTIC—WEAR A BUTTON.

"Where?"

"See? yonder, leaning against that pole wagon."

"And he looks, too, as if he was taking it in preparatory to a closer investigation later on," suggested Bob.

"Watch him," directed Jack.

The man in question was a stranger in Riverdale, and apparently not connected with the shows.

His attire was simply gorgeous—almost a travesty on loud stage burlesque itself.

What caught Jack, however—a genuine young athlete "dead stuck on muscle!"—was the fellow's phenomenal build.

He was one of the most magnificent specimens of full muscular development Jack had ever seen.

But for the toughened face and a Bowery hunch—acquired through evident association—the man was a model Hercules and Apollo combined.

His splendid physique would have charmed any painter or sculptor.

His silk hat a tilt over one eyebrow, he looked leerily at the unconscious performer.

The poked-up rigidity of his cigar, the expression of his pursed lips, a certain restless contraction of the muscles of his hands, were sure pointers to Jack Burton that he was interested or worked up.

"That fellow isn't going to stand it long," observed Jack.

"Stand what?" propounded Bob.

"That padded monstrosity on the stage, posing as a giant."

"Think he'll expose him?"

"I think he'll clean out the whole combination, if he gets riled."

"He's real, is he?"

"A professional slugger, if I don't miss my guess. I'd pay something to see him show off what he can do!"

"Jack! He's going to begin."

"I guess he is."

"Here's fun!" chuckled Buff.

The performer on the platform had just lifted "a block of solid iron weighing a quarter of a ton."

This same, massive-looking and grim, the immense dumbbells, the "three hundred-pound cannon ball," lay about him, formidable and impressive trophies of his prowess.

His lecturer stepped forward now.

"Gentlemen," he said, suavely, "you have witnessed the remarkable exploits of the Modern Samson."

"Rah for Simpson!" from a quartette of academy boys.

"Samson, gentlemen—order, please! To show you how truly marvelous is this phenomenon's magnificent strength, we will bring forward a weight one-quarter the one just handled by him as if it was a feather, and will challenge any two persons in the crowd to lift it out straight a single inch from the floor."

"That's a go!" exclaimed Buff to his companions instantly.

Bob calmed his zeal with a detaining hand.

"Where are you, Jack?" began Buff.

"I'm not on exhibition just now—I want to watch the fun."

"And that big fellow with the talking necktie is going to start it, hot and heavy," predicted Bob.

Two lackeys had dragged a heavy weight upon the stage.

The three watching members of Nick Carter's detective school at once understood that this was a genuine piece of iron—weight just what it was marked: one hundred and twenty-five pounds.

The modern Samson stood back in proud glory, folding his stuffed arms till the false muscles looked like deformities.

The lecturer regarded the silent audience with a certain pitying smile.

"No takers?" he insinuated, patronizingly.

"Put in a peg dere, cully—I'm ye-chicken."

The man Jack was interested in had spoken.

With a conceited roll to his body, he made his way to the step upon the platform.

"Two, youse said?" he remarked.

"Any two," blandly bowed the lecturer, but he looked dubious.

"I'll do it alone."

"You—"

"Wid one duke."

"Impossible!"

"Hey!"

The lecturer made an apologetic backward scramble as the new bully made a

duck at him as if he would butt him off the stage.

The performer acted painfully interested.

"Fust" growled the great voice of the intruder "take dat trash into der back yard!"

"Whoop!"

"Aha!"

"Rubber!" scoffed the new Samson, and he gave "the three-hundred pound cannon ball" a kick that sent it kiting.

"Wood!" he roared, and with the heel of his boot scraped a long streak of paint off "the five hundred-pound weight."

"Luminum!" he growled, tossing back the dumbbells as if they were hairpins. "Now, den, youse—lift dat!"

In a flash the most credulous of the crowd caught on.

They saw that an expose was in order.

"Sir! we never allow—" began the abashed lecturer.

"Lift dat real, genywine weight!" persisted the intruder to the now pale and shrinking "Samson."

"I—I've done my act."

"Lift it!"

"I won't!"

"Yer can't, yer mean. Try it, or I'll chaw yer!"

"Call the police—"

"Come here, you fake!"

The intruder made him come.

He yanked out just once. Hooking one of those stout fingers of his into the belt of the Samson, he gave him a whirl. Up over his head he held him—spun him to the other hand.

Hoisting him in both—squirming, ex-postulating—he gripped him till he half shrieked from the pain.

Slowly dropping forward, this real athlete, never belying the estimate Jack had made of his latent prowess, dipped slowly till his teeth rested on the stout chain surrounding the real weight.

"Whew!"

"Glorious!"

"Hurrah!"

A wild enthusiasm ran the rounds like magic.

With ringing yells, ready to award honor where it was due every time, the

gymnasium-trained fellows of the academy broke loose like a cyclone.

The new giant, the real giant, dropped the weight after lifting it three feet.

He shook the fake exhibitor as he would a poodle dog.

Then he gave him a contemptuous slide to the back of the stage.

Regarded by the exposed performer, his lecturer and their own assistants like a wild steer broken loose in a peaceful grazing meadow, he only grinned at the acclaiming audience.

"Tanks!" he ducked, "but cheese! cheese! it's me daily diet!"

"Encore!"

"Bring me a safe or two, den!"

"Say, you're royal!"

"Speech!"

"Who did dat?"

The tones were like the roar of a roused lion.

Some one had thrown a missile—an old slipper.

It whizzed past the ear of the intruder just as he was about to leave the platform.

Agile as was he powerful, the fellow turned as if set on springs.

Voice, face and hands centred a ferocity of purpose that made the performer shrink as if collapsing.

"Sail into them, beefy!" yelled a bellicose voice.

"Wipe 'em out!"

"Watch me!"

There were four now crowding at the extreme edge of the stage in abject fear.

These, with biffs that were comparative love taps—the intruder crowded promiscuously, pell-mell, neck and heels off the platform.

Behind it were as many as ten candy butchers, tent tossers and hostlers.

From their midst the missile had come, and the intruder guessed it.

They put up a fighting front—one man raising a club, another a spade.

Riverdale Academy crowded up and forward—it was hard work keeping tab on the whirlwind of action into which the intruder suddenly developed.

Nick Carter's detective school, or rather the active branch of it in present

evidence, made front-row efforts to be in at the finish.

Jack Burton was an expert among novices—the one strict connoisseur present.

Even he marveled.

Nick Carter's athletic young pupil adored fistic excellence just as much as he despised useless fighting.

"Muscles like an ox!" commented a casual voice.

"Science!" breathed Jack Burton, and watched and studied.

The exposer fairly mowed down his enemies.

One of them was foolhardy enough to grapple with him.

The fellow cracked as his adversary bent him nearly double!

With a shriek he struck the ground and lay there as if broken in two.

"Out of the way!" ordered Jack, sharply, to several crowding him close.

With his own no insignificant strength he cleared a swath.

"What's the trouble, Jack?" queried Bob, quickly.

"Fellow dropped something."

"The fighter?"

"Yes."

"What is it? Ah! I see!"

Bob groped out for a glittering ornament that had been torn from the vest of the intruder in his last scuffle.

"Coin, chain piece, I guess," he remarked. "He'll kill somebody!"

Bob slipped his find into his pocket to return it to its owner later.

He was intensely engrossed, like everybody else, in a new phase the scrimmage had taken.

Slap—biff—smack!—butting heads together, tripping, tossing, knocking forms aside like a dry goods man passing through a row of dummies, the fistic expert had pressed the assailing mob farther and farther back.

Suddenly one of them stole up behind him and struck him a blow with a wagon stake right across the neck.

The expert whirled—a terrible punishment in his glaring eye.

His assailant, small and nimble, probably some wiry gymnast of the circus ring, jumped over a heavy wagon.

It was side-tipped for repairs.

The stranger could not vault it, but he started to round it, his rage now centred in his last cowardly assailant.

"Foul!" yelled a chorus.

"He's down!"

"Shame!"

Quick as a flash a change had come in the situation.

Six stalwart fellows on the other side of the wagon had done what they evidently counted to be a clever thing.

They had forcibly tipped the wagon.

The stranger wavered, stumbled, fell—the next instant he went flat.

Across his neck directly went the broad, crushing, forward axle of the vehicle.

Two men with clubs ran at the helpless, quivering, pinned victim.

"Stop them!" spoke Jack.

Bob and Buff intercepted the poltroons with promptitude and nerve.

"Pull—him—out!"

Bob Ferret thrilled, Buff Hutchinson felt his flesh crawl.

Jack had done a risky thing.

That quick, keen eye of his had taken in urgency, necessity, in a flashing two seconds' space of time.

He saw the stranger's peril—he knew his own powers.

He could not drag up one hundred and twenty-five pound weights with his teeth, or toss human beings about like glass balls.

But Jack could do what the Samson, strong as he was, probably could not do—he was "a lifter."

He had crept under the wagon and braced.

Up it came an inch, groaning—two, on a tilting quiver.

Panting, Jack saw quick hands pull the stranger free.

Deftly he backed, sprang—down came the wagon, but it did not catch him.

Bob and Buff were holding the stranger, who was slightly phased and getting back his wits.

Jack steadied his shaken nerves and sinews.

The academy boys, rushed to a ring to cheer and lionize their favorite and hero, halted on the edge of a tremendous cheer.

Silence had ruled, strangely unanimous and sudden, during the last two minutes of the startling episode.

Just now a thrilling shriek, somewhat beyond, split the silence like a knife.

It was that vivid, that sudden, that frantic, that Jack Burton nerved up as if struck by an electric wire.

"What's wrong?" he cried, whirling.

He saw in a flash—saw the start of a new occurrence.

It was an incident, a happening the most treinendously wild and blood-curdling that any of Nick Carter's experienced young detectives had ever witnessed.

And Roxy—Nick Carter's nervy, daring girl detective—was in it!

CHAPTER II.

THE LIVING ANCHOR.

Magically the attention of every person within range of that thrilling shriek was enchained.

Instantly eyes and feet were directed to a new part of the common.

The real giant and the fake giant were alike forgotten in a wild, unanimous rush.

Jack Burton led it.

"What is it?" Bob shot at him as he saw him start up.

"Something wrong!"

"How?"

"A woman."

Jack was the first at the side of the woman in question.

She was some nurse maid, he guessed, from the hotel near by.

She wore a dainty cap and the conventional trifle of an apron.

Just now the one was wildly disordered, the other she was aimlessly wrenching in a transport of frenzy.

"Murder!" she screamed, and tore her hair.

"Help!" she added, hysterically, in still more piercing accents.

"Police!"

She made a sobbing, clutching dive at a baby carriage at her side with the last word.

With it, too, Jack had reached her immediate vicinity.

He traced no ordinary excitement in the woman's profound emotion.

She was pawing over the tiny sheets, counterpanes and delicately frilled pillows like a penniless miner hunting for gold.

"My girl!" spoke Jack, touching her arm.

She only screamed wilder than ever.

"What's the matter here?"

"Kill me!" screamed the extraordinary female.

"Nobody wants to kill you."

"He will!"

"Who will?"

"The man!"

"What man?"

"That gave me that!"

"Gave you what?" persisted the puzzled Jack.

"That! that! that!—oh! oh! oh!"

The girl brought up from among the ruffled-up articles of the dainty baby bed a piece of wood.

It was the size of an infant—about the shape, too, wrapped as it was with a little white flannel shawl.

A baby cap was tied over its top, and a baby dress trailed.

"See! see!" wailed the woman.

"I do see!" ejaculated Jack, with a start.

In a flash the truth occurred to him.

The maid was on the point of falling down in a hysterical fit—her heels were kicking and her hands were beating the air now.

For only a second Jack checked the nervous impulse.

"Listen!" he ordered, and actually shook her.

"Yes!" she gulped.

"Baby in that carriage?"

"There was!"

"Some one took it?"

"Stolen!"

"Just now?"

"Kidnapped—hide me! He's coming!"

Jack read things straight and prompt.

While this girl, trusted with some hotel guest's child, was gaping at the circus wonders, her charge had been abducted.

People rarely did such things for a joke—Jack treated the affair seriously.

The more so as he discovered abruptly the girl's "him"—as he saw whose censure she dreaded.

She had pointed to an advancing figure. It was on a rush—the Bowery giant of the recent platform episode.

As she saw him coming she screamed, turned white as flour, and fell down in a half fit, half faint.

"What?"

The word was a thunderbolt. It was so hoarse, so terrible, that people shrank.

In it the newcomer, a vast engine of muscle and power, seemed to challenge humanity as if he would sweep them out of existence if an immediate answer was not provided.

Jack saw something more than casual curiosity in the athlete's eye—intense interest, vivid suspense.

Then, to his amazement, the burly giant wilted as if a blood vessel had burst.

He saw the empty baby carriage—he saw the substituted, dressed-up block of wood, in Jack Burton's hand.

He actually reeled, his eyes usually full of defiance, animosity, toned down to piteous fright.

He began to shake, and the splendid bass of his natural tone subsided to almost a voiceless whisper.

"Boy! boy!" he gasped, "de—de child!"

"Stolen, this girl says."

"And me off guard!"

"Is it your child?"

"Worse!" groaned the man.

"What do you mean by 'worse'?"

"Who took it?"

Up braced the iron-knit form abruptly.

"Who took it?" he fairly screamed, and his eyes grew aglare.

"Mister!"

A barefooted urchin edged to Jack's side and plucked Jack's sleeve.

"What is it?" queried the young detective.

"I saw."

"Saw what?"

"A man at the baby buggy."

"When?"

"Just now—her head was turned, his back was to me, but I noticed him fumbling."

"Go on!" quickly urged Jack.

"Snaked something out."

"The child!"

"Wrapped it up in a coat, and put."

"Where? Needn't tell!" cried Jack.
"You!"

Jack grabbed the crazily swinging arm of the athlete.

All muscle, the fellow was plunging about, not knowing how to work off his terrific emotion any other way.

"What? what?" cried the man, as if in pain.

"That child."

"Yes! yes!"

"See—yonder!"

Crossing a clear space was a man, running.

Jack could not have told why, but the minute his sweeping glance had taken in this fellow he set him down as the abductor.

"That's him, I guess," spoke Jack.

"After him! I'll tear his heart out!" and the giant gnashed his teeth in horrible fury.

"That's him—I know!" added Jack, in a shout.

"If he's hurt the child, I'll rend him limb from limb!" raved the athlete.

Jack's guess had been verified by two observations.

The runner had half turned—he wore a mask covering half his face.

A flapping piece of lace-tucked white trailed from a burden he carried in his arms.

"He's got the child!" voted Jack.
"Now to overhaul him!"

Jack paid no further attention to the fistic expert than to observe that he had started up also, his lurid eye on the far-away runner like that of a tiger spotting prey.

No sprinter, he was soon left behind, but the young athlete found that he had company.

"What?" on one side.

"What?" on the other.

"Kidnapper!" briefly vouchsafed Jack, recognizing Bob and Buff, and economizing his breath.

"Not that fellow's child?"

"Says not."

"Then—"

"Get the child—puzzle out relationship problems later."

"Good advice!"

"I'm freshest!" vaunted Buff.

He forged ahead, leading in what was now a race.

Confused cries behind told that the crowds were watching a scene only half understood.

Bob gave a quick word, and the trio spread out in fan-shape order.

This was done to interrupt the runner ahead if he attempted a side dive.

If the fugitive had any such purpose in view, however, he abandoned it after a backward glance.

The ground rose beyond to a hill top plateau.

Here, staked in, sagged and strained the balloon in which a daily ascension was made.

If the man passed that and dove down the other slope, he would be lost in leafy covert before his pursuers could cross the crest.

"Spurt up!" sang out Jack, reckoning out all this.

"Got your pistol?" called Bob—"mine at home."

"Empty," explained Jack. "Buff?"

"Blank cartridges—for the celebration, you know?"

"Shoot anyway!"

"To scare?"

"Try it!"

Buff forced the experiment.

The runner, some two hundred yards ahead, spun around with the quickness of a top.

Then all three saw the defying mask of black silk covering the face to the lips.

The fellow held out the white-robed infant in one hand.

With the other he waved a long blade-bared knife.

So suggestively did he graze his helpless burden with its point that Jack shuddered.

"Pursue—I kill!" was the mute but significant menace conveyed.

What the man would have done—for the trio kept on unheedingly—its members could only guess, for the fellow's attention was just then distracted from them entirely. A chorus of gay, careless, ringing voices, very near, made him start, and the boys stared in turn.

Through a fringe of bushes at the side

of the hill burst a bevy in lively colors, and tripping and laughing.

"Seminary girls!" spoke Buff.

"If they block him!"

They did not. The runner saw them nearly in his course.

He did not veer, but with a hideous gesture of ferocity brandished the blade he bore.

In a second, laughter gave place to terrified shrieks.

The pressing forward group shrank back as at a simoon's scorching blast.

All except one—a form the spryest, the daintiest, left the coterie as if singled out by some irresistible purpose.

Jack gave a great gulp of hope.

Bob's eyes sparkled.

Buff chuckled.

"Roxy!" voiced all three, and in unison.

It was Nick Carter's girl detective—there was something too characteristically individual in her looks, her pose, her actions, to baffle the three pairs of keen eyes, even at a distance.

Like them, the little professional lady had come to Riverdale, following up an important criminal case.

Like them, she had found it necessary to adopt a school guise.

Like them, she had lingered, making the seminary her base of operations for new cases constantly developing.

Like them, she was part and parcel of the jollification crowds—just as girlish as was she shrewd, just as happy-hearted as was she ambitious.

Ever ready for detective work, in the school as on Broadway, the New York flower girl had given the running man and the brandishing knife a sinister reading, and had sprang like magic into the ranks of duty.

She ran straight after and up toward the fellow.

He showed his white, gleaming teeth, ejected a hissing growl audible at fifty yards, and waved the knife anew.

"She don't scare!" remarked Buff.

The man saw that he had a dauntless spirit to deal with.

"He's stolen a child!"

Bob deemed it best to notify their quick-witted girl comrade.

WEAR A "MAINE" BUTTON.

"REMEMBER THE MAINE!"

The direction was a spur—Roxy's feet started tripping.

The fugitive gave the hillside one swift sweep with his glance, then he put ahead fast as he could go.

"Counted the chances—in for a race!" decided Jack.

"With Roxy the nearest!" pursued Bob, calculatingly.

"So, she'll get him!" prophesied Buff, with entire contentment.

"He's stopped!"

"She's down!"

"Oh, the brave little heroine!"

Roxy was one. She never had a care for peril, and therefore did not know what fear meant.

She had gained, gained—gained on the man, but only through prodigious efforts that made her feet fly in a kind of a dizzying twinkle.

The running, suspenseful trio saw her behind the fugitive.

Then she was at his side, then in front.

A push, a blow, some movement not exactly traceable, swept Roxy aside.

She whirled forcibly, but a streak of white cloth in her hand told that she had attempted to rescue the kidnapper's burden. What she did, half prostrate—what missile, quickly seized, deftly sped, the breathless trio could not tell, but the man, running on, howled.

Then he limped and halted, shot back a ringing anathema at the girl detective, and posed in a baffled, desperate way.

Before Roxy could get up, however, he was in action again.

The swinging, bulging balloon seemed to suggest something to him.

With a start Bob saw him stride the ring rope.

With a yell Buff noted that he lifted over the edge of the swaying basket.

"He'll never!" gasped Jack, fairly a thrill.

"He has!" voiced Bob.

"Sent that little life—"

"Aloft!"

The scoundrel's intention was outlined in a second—executed in a flash.

The disposing, the destruction of his kidnapped charge seemed what he was directly aiming at.

The minute he dropped the child over into the basket of the balloon, he ran to a heavy iron stake driven into the ground.

"Not going himself—!" began Buff.

"He's cut the ropes!"

A dazzling play of the knife slashed and danced in mid-air.

The last cable slit, swept the fellow's limbs like a whiplash, and came very nearly entangling him.

The balloon began to skim forward.

Unhampered, the heartless miscreant put down the hill.

"Buff!" shouted Bob.

"I understand!"

As Buff diverged to take up the solitary pursuit directed, Bob and Jack ran straight on.

The balloon was scudding, but it had scarcely lifted.

Some trough of heavy air gave an even-drawing suction, and both boys saw that if they could come up with the balloon something might yet be done.

Roxy had got to her feet.

Her saucy hat had blown off, and her rare wealth of sunny locks ran out like golden streamers.

She looked nowhere but at the balloon—her feet fairly skimmed the green sward.

"It's coming back!" cried Jack, hopefully.

The balloon had taken a sharp backward swoop.

Still Roxy ran on.

"It's rising!" shouted Bob.

With the words he came to a halt.

For the chase of man, child and gas bag was—ended.

The latter had struck harmonious air soundings at last.

Shivering till its silky surface buzzed and flapped, it suddenly steadied.

Then up it went.

"Lost!" muttered Jack, grimly.

"She's done it!" bolted Bob Ferret.

Roxy had.

Jack turning white, Bob dumb as with a shock, the twain stared up.

It was not to follow the course of the speeding balloon.

It was to observe as well, dangling, curving, whipped about like a feather—

Roxy, Nick Carter's girl detective, now a living anchor to the star-sailing air ship!

CHAPTER III.

THE GIANT AND THE PIGMY.

Bob Ferret spoke not a word.

Jack Burton stood spellbound.

It was no time for vain discussion, for frantic emotion—both expert young professionals realized this.

They could only watch and think.

Suddenly out of the thinking grew action.

"I'll chase the balloon."

Jack spoke steadily enough—just as if he was talking of hunting up a stray land vehicle.

"Good," nodded Bob, simply.

But Jack's face was still colorless, and Bob could feel his heart thumping mightily.

The silence that precedes a frightful storm swayed back of them, around them.

A thousand eyes were riveted on the free trapeze exhibition now going on in the air.

Roxy had clutched the dangling rope purposely.

Bob comprehended that the same nerve that had impelled her to this hazardous undertaking would take her safely up to the basket of the balloon.

It did. He could feel the air flutter as if tremulous with the relief aspiration of a vast chorus.

The living anchor went up the swaying rope, over the basket edge.

"Pluck to the core!"

Bob thrilled to the cheer of the myriad—Roxy was airily waving her hand to her immense audience.

Kloppety-klop!

A new sound broke in upon the vague babel of noises ensuing.

Jack was mounted. Somewhere he had secured a horse, a great, black, fire-eyed animal.

It was probably one of the circus outfit, and was restive of restraint.

A superb horseman, however, the young athlete sat the saddle as if he was a statue planted there.

Buff after the man who had stolen the child—Jack chasing the balloon—clever,

dauntless Roxy at its helm—Bob saw work sorted out less fearlessly now.

"She'll manage," he hoped. "Roxy was raised for the circus, so—girl prodigy in other things, why not girl aeronaut? She'll get onto the ropes, if anybody!"

What of the man with the iron fists, and the maid of the baby carriage?

Bob had this mystery to dig out, and was just turning his attention to the same as there came a prompt answer to his mental question.

"Hello!" he voiced.

Bob gave a glance up at the balloon—it was a sideling speck, losing itself in the hilly mists.

Then he started upon a keen run.

A ring—but a tidily-broad ring—surrounded the fistic expert.

It seemed that he had seen the result of the pursuit, and had abandoned the same.

Coming back, he had sought the maid who had been in charge of the stolen infant.

She was being carried to the hotel, still in her faint.

Of the baby carriage the stranger was now making kindling wood.

Frenzied, half-insane, he crushed it with his hands, he tore it piece from piece, raving, unreasoning.

He took a plunge as Bob started to join him and shot straight from the scene.

A curious group followed—the man turned just twice, swung his iron arms, grating out a fearful threat, and they fell back.

"Which way?" breathed Bob, as he rounded a tent that had momentarily shut the flying stranger from view.

The lounging addressed pointed across to a saloon. Bob's brow wrinkled.

"All muscle—hasn't got the wind to stand up under a blow that doesn't come from the fist!" he stoliloquized. "He's my share of this queer complication.

How shall I tackle him?"

Bob glided into the gilded bar-room. The fistic expert stood at its counter.

"Drink!" he uttered hoarsely.

As he spoke he brought his ponderous fist down before him with a concussion that caused the waiter to jump.

Bob hesitated. Then he drew to one side of the place.

"No use trying to stop him now," he reflected. "I know his kind—blind, deaf, irrational as a mule till he's 'drowned' his troubles, and got 'fired up' for anything desperate!"

The waiter put out a bottle.

As he tipped and tasted it, the drinker let out a sort of roar.

With one squeeze of thumb and forefinger he splintered the decanter to atoms.

"Stronger!" he voiced.

"You—you wish brandy, sir?" trembled the bartender.

"Fire! bilin' lead! pure alcohol—something dat hits and riles and burns—see?"

The waiter stood in appalled silence as his customer took charge of the new bottle.

One, two, three—he filled to the brim and gulped down the fiery stuff poured without stopping to breathe.

One, two, three—a ten seconds' wait and a full pint followed.

Bob wondered if he was "primed" yet. He started to venture an approach, but paused.

"I can reach him," suddenly remembered the young detective.

"With this!" Bob added, and drew out the golden ornament jerked from the man's vest in the platform scrimmage.

"I say!" softly whistled Bob the ensuing instant.

The ornament he had picked up near the circus platform was a kind of solid gold shield.

"A medal," traced Bob. "Jack was right. This man is somebody."

Somebody, indeed—the metal bore an inscription.

It certified that "Tug Dempsey" was "the champion heavyweight pugilist of the Pacific coast."

Bob had heard of the celebrity before—wondered what he was doing at Riverdale—wondered at the possible connection between the great husky giant and the delicate missing infant.

"You'll—you'll kill yourself, sir!" remonstrated the bartender, as the pugilist put out his hand to take up the decanter again.

"Call me loaded!"

"You mustn't do that!" softly interfered Bob Ferret.

Dempsey had swung back the bottle.

In his present savage frame of mind he would soon get into trouble.

Bob gave a nimble spring—being unexpected, he carried his point.

He deftly twisted the bottle from its blow-aimed grasp.

The pugilist turned on him like a tiger.

"Who—who—?" he flared.

"This yours, Mr. Dempsey?" prodded Bob with serious politeness.

He slipped the bottle behind him and he extended the medal.

The pugilist's mind diverted, his ferocity of eye turned to eager satisfaction.

"Where did you get it?" he questioned, fondling the medal as if he considered it a treasure.

"Where you dropped it—in the fight."

"Was you dere—say! Youse was one of de fellies who helped me out from under de wagon!" exclaimed Dempsey, with a keen stare of inspection.

"While my partner pried it up—yes."

"Where is he? Who is he—?"

"Come over here and let me tell you," suggested Bob.

Power of eye, of superior mental force, or the first weakening daze of liquor—at all events, the pugilist allowed Bob to lead him to a corner seat.

Before he could speak his mind, however, the bundle of untrained emotions went all to pieces again.

The medal, interest in Jack—everything was forgotten in a wild transport of emotion as a stinging lash of memory tormented the great bulk of a fellow.

"What's it all! What am I!" he gulped almost sobbing. "I've flunked—I've allowed myself to be knocked out!"

He started to swing himself to his feet, to the bar again.

"Mr. Dempsey," said Bob, firmly, "you've got to listen to me!"

"Huh!" glared the giant.

"Got to, I said!"

"Yer free! If it wasn't dat yer friendly crowd had given me de glad hand—!"

"Friendly! One word, and then treat us like rubbish, if you want to," hurried on Bob, "but it's more than friendly."

"I'd have been crushed, sure—youse saved me."

"Not that."

"What, den?"

"That baby."

"Oh—"

"Don't fly to pieces. 'Twon't do you any good. The baby is all right."

"When I saw wid me own eyes—"

"What?"

"Kidnapped!"

"But the abductor dropped the child."

"Into a balloon!"

"Better than his murderous grasp."

"Aloft! A wild balloon, diving anywhere, everywheres—dark coming on!"

"With another of our friends in charge."

"Dat gal—"

"Is one of us."

"And who are youse?"

Bob wondered if he had better risk a star play.

He did risk it.

Placing his lips close to the pugilist's ear, he spoke a low, impressive sentence:

"Four members of Nick Carter's detective school."

"What!"

Dempsey's nerves jumped as if he had been shot.

He stared vaguely at the speaker.

It was as the latter suspected—the name of the veteran thief-taker was magic everywhere.

"T'ought youse belonged in New York? What youse doing here?" demanded the pugilist, looking Bob over in a puzzled way.

"What are you? Suppose we help each other."

"How?"

"We're looking for a case—that's our business."

"Yep."

"You've got one ripe for working?"

"Let me tink, will yer?"

"Sure thing!"

Thinking was a ponderous performance with the man who knew only how to eat, drink, sleep, fight.

His great brow furrowed, his eyes looked troubled, his temples knotted as he pitted emotion, self-fistic reliance, the encroaching sham courage of liquor against a practical proposition.

"Kid!" he broke out at last—"if you takes it dat way?"

"That's all right—I don't pretend to be gray headed."

"I'm of the profesh?"

"And a good sample."

"You're of the profesh?"

"Well, call it so."

"I'm in trouble—I need youse."

"That's sensible conclusion, Mr. Dempsey. We are here on the quiet—you won't forget that?"

"Cert, nit!"

"I'd like to ask you some questions."

"Spiel—what do youse want to know?"

"What about that baby?"

"It isn't mine."

"I understand that."

"I'll tell youse a queer yarn," said the pugilist.

"Ready to hear it."

"I was showin' off me p'ints at Denny Devlin's, in de Bowery. Stiddy t'ing. Along comes a mysterious felly."

"When?"

"Two nights ago. He looked me over and he flashes a good-sized roll."

"What was his game?"

"He hires me—I was onct hired to guard railway presidents regularly, you see. Bimeby, he comes back wid a bundle. Slap me peepers—a babe!"

"Young?"

"Not a year old."

"The one?"

"De one!"

"Hold on, now!"

Every time the stolen infant was alluded to, the pugilist got on the point of thrashing around again.

"I'll slow up, only it's hard. He tells me he trusts me honor. Dat's where he's got me."

"You was to take charge of the child?"

"Sacred—said he'd trust me as he couldn't a hired platoon of police, as he wouldn't an army. Me git-up made him t'ink no one could take de kid from me. I t'ought so, too. He warned me to look out for sneaks—to guard de kid as I would me own life—to get quietly out of New York city."

"Here?"

"T'ursday night—dat's to-morrow—he was to come here for it."

"What was his name?"

"You've got me."

"What did he look like?"

"Gentlemanly—but he was disguised."

"You took him for straight goods?"

"I took him for being wrapped up in dat kid, heart and soul. I took de commish. Wasn't it dead easy? Dis aft I t'inks de little t'ing needs air, same's de birds, and butterflies, and caterpillars. I trusted de dame you saw—oh, say! I can't sit still."

"Stand up, then, for I'm almost through. One more question."

"Say it, quick!"

"Do you suspect who stole the child?"

"I do."

Bob's eyes brightened.

"Tell," he directed.

"A felly I noticed hanging around twict dis morning."

"You'd know him again?"

"Would I? Let me! When I lay me mitts on him he stops walking for a mont'!"

"Very well, you saw the man running with the child?"

"Yep—his back."

"It was the same man?"

"It was de same man. Come on—I'm bilin' agin'!"

"You're going—"

"I'm going to find that felly, if he's in Riverdale!" asserted Dempsey, his jaws set firm as hitching posts. "Will youse help me?"

"That's what I'm here for," responded Bob.

"Den togedder we'll beat de world! He can't give up de kid, but he can give an account of hisself, and square me wid me boss when he turns up."

"You think the fellow is in town?"

"Yep," nodded Dempsey, "and I tink I knows where to look for him."

The fugitive, if he had escaped Buff, certainly now had an opportunity for sneaking back toward and losing himself in it.

Dusk had come down by the time Bob and his strange escort left the saloon.

Bob had prevailed on his companion to indulge in no more liquor.

He had gathered all the points from him he was able to give.

His bare story comprised the bare facts.

The rest Bob had to guess out: here was a mysterious unknown trying to guard, conceal, a mysterious infant.

Some one antagonistic was seeking to kidnap or destroy the child.

If they were aiming as well at the man who had employed the pugilist it was natural that they would lurk about Riverdale till he might appear.

Bob realized that the safe landing of Roxy, the return of Jack or Buff, the appearance of Dempsey's employer, might clear up the case in a twinkling.

Nick Carter, however, had taught his apt novices never to lie idle when vital issues depended.

Roxy and the child might never return—an air voyage was no safe experience.

Then Jack would learn nothing, as Buff might be equally unfortunate—the same hand that had reached the child might reach its presumable father.

The exploration of this certain mystery, therefore, might depend solely upon what Bob and his companion learned in the next few hours—upon their success in locating the abductor of the infant.

Dempsey's plan was simple—to visit the lower strata of Riverdale.

Such existed, even in that college-bred centre, and particularly just now, with a circus in town.

Dempsey made the rounds of the saloons. Then he steered Bob into a place, the existence of which was a new discovery for the young detective.

It was a secret gaming haunt, patronized, Bob guessed from the outside hangers on, by a generally hard crowd.

"I take me man to be a tough—if he is, it's such joints he'll head for," theorized the pugilist. "No harm lookin', anyways?"

"Not a bit of it!" assented Bob.

Dempsey reached a door as he spoke. He tapped. A wicket shot back.

"Who is it?" called through a pair of lips.

"Visitors."

"Password?"

"Never mind dat, cully—we passes anywheres."

"You don't pass here!"

"Who says it?"

"I do."

"Dat says nit!"

With one blow of his fist Dempsey drove the door back.

It carried the doorkeeper flat, Bob saw, as they passed through.

Half-a-dozen fellows started up from a gaming table at the assault.

One look at Dempsey, however, squelched them—they simply looked, an intimation of his identity ran the rounds, and two men left the room hurriedly through a rear door.

Dempsey leisurely inspected the men, the game going on, the pictures on the walls.

The biggest fellow in the bunch finally got up and approached the twain.

"Gents," he smirked, "won't you indulge in a round?"

Bob shook his head.

"Not me," gruffly stated Dempsey—"we're only lookin', dis eve."

"We don't run a free show!" ventured the man.

"Dat so?"

Bob noticed considerable irritability of manner about Dempsey.

The latter had been acting for some moments as if he was moving about with a purpose or preparing for a break.

"Pay your footing or get out!" ordered the man, becoming bold at the pugilist's placid manner. "Take a chance in that machine, at least?"

"A nickel-in-the-slot device stood directly near the speaker.

Dempsey's eye lit with a lurid glow.

He swaggered toward Bob.

"Kid," he whispered hoarsely, "he's here!"

"Who?"

"De guy—de man we're after."

"How do you know?"

"I heard his voice. I've heard it before—beyond that door."

"In that next room?"

"Yep—I'll call them all out—grab, when I spot."

"Call them—how?"

"Watch and see."

This fragment of conversation had been carried on with indescribable swiftness.

Now Dempsey turned to the gambling house steerer.

"Me friend," he said, slowly, "we're to pay our footing, eh?"

"After breaking down that door—I should hope!"

"In dis nickel in de slot machine?"

"That's the rule."

"I'll do it!"

Dempsey's hand flashed to his pistol pocket.

"Dis way!" he added.

Bang! bang! bang! bang! with bullets the pugilist filled the slot instead of nickels.

In a second the place was in an uproar.

The pugilist's purpose was served, for there was an echoing commotion in the rear room.

To its locked door Dempsey sprang.

"Face dem!" he whispered to Bob, thrusting his half-emptied revolver into his hand.

"Yes!" responded the young detective, placing himself promptly at the speaker's side.

"Hold dem!"

"Till you identify your man."

"Dat's it!"

Bang—crash!

The door went down—through the break sprang Bob first.

Dempsey guarded the rear.

He had turned.

"Come nigh my flippers, any of youse," he hailed those behind him, "and I'll lay you out!"

Bob ran down a ten-foot entry to come into an apartment where there were a dozen or more men.

They had evidently just arisen in alarm from playing cards at a long, narrow table.

"Not a man will stir!" proclaimed Bob.

"A raid!"

"No, a search—I mean it!"

Bob's leveled menace enforced a tableau.

"Quick!" he spoke, to hail Dempsey.

"Coming—what you done? Take dat—and youse!"

Bob saw two men dart after Dempsey in the half-dark hall.

Evidently Dempsey dealt promptly with them, for he came speedily forward now.

"Dark here!" muttered the giant. "Now, den, kid! Where's de roomfull?"

"Here!"

"I hear you."

"Pick out your man!"

"Say!"

Dempsey, advancing, halted and shook his head in a queer way.

"Too dim to make dem out——" he began.

"Why! there's a bright light——"

Bob Ferret intuitively felt that something was wrong.

He uttered a low, long cry as he scanned rapidly the face of the pugilist.

"Can't you see?" he questioned.

"I—I don't seem to," stammered Dempsey, his hands passing over his eyes in an uncertain way.

"Why——" began Bob, with a shock.

He paused with a thrill.

He understood now the quick attack in the passage way.

The crowd knew who the pugilist was, and who he was after.

In some deft, secret way they had got at his eyes.

An appalling thing had happened——

The miscreants had blinded the giant!

CHAPTER IV.

THE BLACK BAG.

Bob Ferret was blocked in a hard place.

It was two days after the disappearance of Roxy and the balloon.

Bob sat in his room at Riverdale Academy studying the most complicated problem that had ever fallen to his lot to solve in a professional way.

Three papers lay before him—all written.

One was from Nick Carter in New York city, to whom Bob had telegraphed the evening previous.

It ran:

"No trace of the balloon, no word from Roxy, but will hunt up that end of the case."

The second was from the surgeon in charge of the town hospital, and read:

"Mr. Tug Dempsey's eyesight is seriously but possibly not permanently affected."

The third was an invitation from the "Thirteen Club" of Riverdale Academy, inviting the three young detective students to a "jamboree in a melon-patch" that night.

Bob tossed this latter aside almost petulantly—he had no heart for fun.

Jack Burton came in just then.

"Things still looking glum, Bob?" he hailed.

"Desperately! The case is a mix-up—motives, plots and actors. It's not that I'm so anxious about, though."

"No?"

"Roxy!"

Jack looked equally solicitous.

"And Buff."

Jack's girmness took a speculative tinge.

"Not a word from him, either?"

"Not a breath."

"Don't that look like something?"

"It looks as if we've lost two of our best allies."

"Then Roxy will belie her past skill, and Buff his usual shrewdness."

"And Thursday has come and gone."

"The day when the pugilist's employer was to show up, according to Dempsey's account?"

"Exactly."

"And he didn't!"

"And hasn't."

"It's a muddle!" confessed Jack. "My chase was distanced—that blinding exploit lost you the child stealer."

"Yes, and disables that fretting giant, who threatens to smash everything and everybody, 'once he gets a peeper open'!" responded Bob. "They put the lights out, or I'd have cornered the mob. Since then it's been mum and shady around those gambling diggings."

"Let's take a walk."

"What for?"

"The crowd are up to some high jinks mischief, and I don't feel like being in it."

"Neither do I."

"Come on."

In twenty minutes the two young detectives had left the academy at a distance behind them.

They pursued the winding country road with somewhat depressed spirits.

It seemed as if their hands were tied completely.

Allowing that Roxy and Buff would eventually turn up all right as they usually did, there was ground for additional anxiety and perplexity.

The ins and outs, the merits and essence of the child stealing case were obscured in the densest kind of a fog.

The man who had tried to abduct the infant had apparently disappeared from Riverdale.

The presumable father of the child had not appeared as agreed, and this looked as if he had fallen into trouble.

"What's back of all this circumlocution?" propounded Bob.

"And why?" supplemented Jack.

"We haven't a hint."

"Nor a starter."

"Unless—get back!"

Bob gave Jack a back-handed sweep behind an immense tree so suddenly that his companion blinked.

"What's that for?" he challenged.

"S-st!"

"What 's-st' for?"

"Cautious!"

"Person would imagine that you had discovered something."

"I—think—I—have!"

Bob, screened by the roadside giant himself, was acting sensational.

Speaking in jerks, he accompanied his exclamatory utterance with half a dozen little squints beyond the rounding edge of the tree.

He held Jack with one hand flat against it.

"Now, you look!" he directed.

The sun had gone down, but a couple of hundred feet away all of a slowly driven buggy was visible.

It was going from them at a rate of speed indicating that it had just started up from a rest.

"Horse, buggy, man," reported Jack.

"Nothing else?"

"Not that I see."

"Rear axle."

"The dickens!"

"I thought you'd get excited!"

"Buff's necktie!"

"Jack, you're shrewd."

"Anybody would recognize that—we rigged him about its loud style. He wore it the day he disappeared."

"And, Jack, you've got a good memory."

"See here! we mustn't lose that!"

"It takes away that homesick feeling?" brightened up Bob.

"It's a hint—a clue, certain, important."

"Now then to overtake it."

If Bob was leisurely, it was because he was delighted.

If Jack made no precipitate rush after the vanishing splotch of color, it was because he was confident.

There was no doubt of the necktie—it had been a daring wardrobe introduction on the part of Buff that had even dazed the foppish exquisites of the academy.

Trivial as it was, however, Bob felt a load lifted off his mind, and heart buoyed up with hope as he recognized the dangling object.

"Buff's," he spoke, starting a course where bushes shaded them, "so Buff tied it on there."

"As a signal."

"To us."

"Knowing that the buggy was coming to Riverdale."

"Why else?"

"Then our business is with the man in the buggy."

"Strictly."

"It was not hard to figure out the situation."

Buff, in trouble or shadowing, had been able only thus far to risk conveying a hint to his fellows.

Why, wherefore, when, how—all this would be explained later.

It attached, too, of a surety, to the child-stealing case.

Upon that affair Buff had started forth the day of his disappearance—some complication of the same had certainly detained him.

"Now!" spoke Bob, in a quick breath.

By rapid running the twain had come up with the buggy.

Its top was half down—the rim of the driver's hat was just visible above the hood.

Nick Carter's experts knew how to stop most anything four-wheeled or four-footed.

In the present instance Jack took the initiatory.

He ran up behind the buggy, and there was a jar.

Jack had gripped a spoke on either rear wheel, and, bracing, held tight.

The vehicle came to a stop with a sudden jolt.

Bob shot sideways at the buggy, a long, straight branch in his hand.

"Let go!" he ordered.

"Locked!" uttered Jack, as the branch penetrated the space of four spokes.

A cry of excitement, of alarm, sounded from the buggy seat.

"What's this?" demanded a sharp voice.

The driver, standing up, looked over the slanting buggy top.

He had a fairly frank and open face, although a deep-drawn hat obscured its upper part in shadow.

He looked only startled at first, but as he noted the wooden bar that hampered so effectually, suspicious, fright, flashed to his eyes.

"What—what do you want?" he demanded, his voice rather anxious.

"You, I reckon," spoke up Bob.

"Yes, we want to know where this rig came from," added Jack.

"Stand back, there!"

"Oh, no!"

"I won't be robbed!"

"Nobody—"

Jack dodged there. The two young detectives had come around to the side of the buggy now.

Instantly the man reached down.

He stuffed something bulky so quickly into the breast of his coat that even its outlines—except that it was round—were not discernable.

Then he grabbed the whip from its socket, reversed it, and struck out.

Bob dodged too late. By hazard the leaded handle met the side of his head.

He toppled, and Jack, roused up, fired at his comrade's hurt.

"Come out!" he pronounced, grimly.

He grabbed the man's two feet.

Lifting, jerking, and then swinging, Jack's powerful strength was greater than he thought.

His adversary was light. Calculating to land him in the road, Jack sent him shooting clear among the bushes at its side.

There was a crack to distract his attention for an instant.

The horse, startled, sprang forward with a force that happened to snap in two the locking branch at the rear wheels.

Jack sprang forward to drag Bob, half down, out of the way of the scurrying hoofs.

"Not hurt!" reported the latter, promptly.

"Good!"

"But the rig?"

"Let it go. It's the man we want."

"Yes—he acted suspicious, don't you think?"

"He was desperately afraid of being robbed."

"And stuffed something into his coat?"

"Big and round."

"Jack, you've done it!"

Spry Bob, running forward to the spot where the man had landed, halted with a dismayed shout.

"Done what?" projected Jack, hurrying to his side.

"Gone!"

"Impossible!"

"Vanished!"

"He couldn't!"

"He has!"

"Follow the broken bushes!"

The man had got away.

The buggy was a tracer, but they thought of its owner first.

Jack felt very anxious as they followed the course plainly pursued by the fugitive.

It led into a belt of thick timber, and he knew that the dense shadows of twilight would prove baffling there.

They lost the trail, found it, lost it

YOU SHOULD GET A WAR BADGE AT ONCE.

again, came to some brush, and stood staring at one another.

"He's given us the slip," mourned Bob.

"Effectually."

"And we let the rig go!"

Jack rubbed his chin a trifle dolefully.

"We've not been very smart!" he declared.

"The man was worth investigating."

"With missing Buff Hutchinson's necktie tied to his buggy wheel—slightly!"

"I heard something, then!" interrupted Bob, sharply, bending his ear.

"And I saw something!" added Jack, convincingly, straining his glance.

Both pressed forward anew.

"Thought I heard a mumbling," spoke Bob.

"Know I saw a flitting form," asserted his companion.

"Where are we, anyway? Oh! I see."

"Well?"

"Griscom's farm."

"That's so."

"Right up beyond his melon patch."

The boys skirted a low wire fence.

Over its top strand hung a lot of black seedbags, and these and the top of some distant sheds gave them a clear idea of location.

They made several moves that proved feints or failures.

Somebody besides themselves seemed to be in the vicinity, but they failed to successfully run down vague, though frequent, pointers of the fact.

Suddenly Bob made a dart, and Jack followed with a spring.

"Got you!" boasted the former.

"Let go!"

"Not our man!" muttered Jack, disappointedly.

"Robinson—Jackson!" panted a breathless voice.

"One of the academy boys," spoke Bob, peering.

"Here, take it!" urged the captive just released.

"Take what?" queried Bob.

"Melon—in the bag."

"You're not—"

"Preparing a feast for the Thirteen Club. Aren't you in it?"

"Not on this occasion," dissented Jack. "Stealing, old chap!"

"Too moral! Why! there's a full-grown man nosing among the vines. I grabbed that one from him. He fought like a tiger."

"We don't want it."

"Oh! help that much. Hold it till I make a other raid. All the fellows are in there."

Bang!

"All the fellows" came out of there, at that moment.

Each one was loaded. They had not only appropriated Farmer Griscom's fruit, but Farmer Griscom's seed bags, as well, to stow it in.

Discovered, the ruralite was on their heels with a shotgun.

"Scoot!" yelled a warning voice.

"Loaded with salt and pepper!" bawled another.

"Make a break, Jack!" advised Bob. "We don't want to be implicated."

"Not their way, then."

"No, this—we've got less mischievous work on hand just now."

Bob had almost involuntarily taken in charge the bag thrust upon him.

He retained possession of it—he scarcely knew why—as the crowd surged past them and he and Jack retreated in a contrary direction.

Then, reaching a clearing, as they came to a standstill he set it on a fence-post.

"Well, Jack?" he spoke, his mind recurring solely and seriously to the professional business on hand.

"Well, Bob?"

"It's safe to say the man has eluded us."

"Miles."

"But the horse went down that road—"

"It's the next thing to follow."

"Come on."

"All right. Hold up! What are you going to do with this?"

Jack touched the bag on the fence post with his hand as he spoke.

"Oh! that won't be missed. Leave it there."

"Melon, you said?"

"No, the fellow said who wanted to

make us its custodian while he snaked another."

"It's no melon."

"Oh! I guess so."

Jack felt over the outlines of the inclosure through the cloth of the bag.

"Not!" he dissented, more forcibly than before.

"Must be."

"Don't feel like it."

"What is it, then?"

"We'll see."

"Horrors!"

"Preposterous!"

Jack rolled out the inclosure of the bag.

Thunderstruck, he viewed it, and Bob reeled back with a shock.

It was, indeed, no melon.

It was a head—a human head!

CHAPTER V.

THE VOICE FROM THE WELL.

Nick Carter's experienced young novices were used to gruesome things in their varied experience, but neither could repress a shudder.

Instead of the soft, plunky swat of a juicy melon, the object from the bag had struck the ground with a hollow, crispy tap.

"Is this a trick—" began Jack.

"No!" spoke Bob, definitely, and his eyes glowed with sentient thought.

"That boy said—"

"That it was a melon?"

"Yes."

"Well, he supposed it."

"You fancy so?"

"I am sure of it, Jack."

Bob got nearer down to the grim object. He flared a match.

Jack gave another start.

"Do you see?" interrogated his companion.

"A mummy's head!"

"Old as Ramesis!"

"Then it is a trick."

"Then it isn't a trick!"

"Bob, you talk positive!"

"Because I've been thinking."

"And struck a theory?"

"Exactly so."

"What?"

Bob had picked up the head.

It was just what Jack had said—it belonged to a mummy.

Further claims to its antiquity seemed also well founded.

Shriveled, cracked, dried, it precisely resembled the Egyptian relics both spectators had seen time and again in public museums, thousands and thousands of years old.

"If they had such things at the academy—" began Jack.

"Which they haven't, so it didn't come from there," interrupted Bob. "I tell you this strange thing came from our man."

"And by our man you mean?"

"The fellow you snaked out of the buggy."

"Sho, Bob!"

"Sure, Jack!"

"Then your idea is that this is what we saw him thrust so quickly into the breast of his coat?"

"That's my idea," assented Bob, promptly.

"But how do you work it around to its present situation?"

"We chased—he ran?"

"And lost him."

"Near the melon patch, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Very well, those seed bags of Farmer Griscom are hanging on every fence. What more natural than that our man should grab one and use it to conceal the head?"

"Allowing that?"

"He puts on and runs right into the Thirteen Club bunch in the melon patch."

"All this looks easy."

"And rational. The man gets mixed up. The fellows scrimmage lively. It was dim dusk. In the rush he lost his bag."

"For a fact, Bob! The boy who gave us the bag said a grown-up man was in the shuffle," commented Jack, reflectively.

"And further that he grabbed the bag for sport and its owner put up a fight like a tiger?"

"That's right."

"Our man!"

"You've convinced me."

"His bag!"

"I'll allow it now."

"Why was he carrying this gruesome thing around with him?"

"Ah! there we strike a deeper drift."

"He valued it."

"Judging from his actions—immensely."

"Feared being robbed?"

"Said so, at least," nodded Jack.

"He's mixed up with the child-stealing case."

"If Buff's necktie tells anything."

"And we're right in the middle of the mystery!"

"If facts were not so patently palpable, Bob might have considered they were in a dream."

All repulsion concerning the mummy head had now departed.

Looking at it practically, it was nothing more than a relic, and Bob handled it as he would a petrified curiosity.

He indulged in the deepest kind of a reverie.

Something tangible attached to that strange head, and he floundered for a clue as to what it might be.

"You see, Jack——" he recommenced, looking up to give his comrade the benefit of numerous wild and peculiar theories that had suggested themselves.

Bob paused abruptly.

Jack was no longer at his side.

"Jack gone?" murmured Bob, a little wonderingly. "He must have stolen away. Why?"

Bob put the head back in the bag and set it again on the fence post.

"Gives me a pain every time I look at it!" he soliloquized. "If we never get any deeper into this affair, I'll confess a man scooting around the country with that thing the prize puzzle I've run across!"

Bob bent his ear keenly as a whistle sounded.

"That's Jack!" he exclaimed.

The call was urgent-toned—it spurred up Bob for that reason.

The system of signals employed by the members of Nick Carter's detective school had the range of a whole intelligible alphabet.

"That said 'come,' and 'come' quick!" fluttered Bob. "That direction? Repeated! I'm headed now!"

Bob dashed through brush and brier.

As he reached a spot where a farmhouse had burned down a week previous, he slowed and approached Jack.

The latter was astride a rickety, broken platform.

He was holding the crank handle of an old-fashioned pump, and holding it in a way that showed a distinct purpose and effort.

"What took you away from me so suddenly?" propounded Bob.

"Spotted a lurker," was the brisk response.

"And what brought you here?"

"Nailed the lurker."

"You mean——"

"Down there."

Bob looked his astonishment.

He leaned over and peered where the top boards of the well were missing.

"You mean down that well?" he interrogated.

"Said so."

"Your lurker—a man?"

"A lurker, a man, our man—the fellow who was in the buggy, the owner of that mysterious head."

Bob stared, almost wildly.

"How——" he began.

"Would run, wouldn't stop, didn't mark where he was going, tumbled. No, you don't!"

There was a jangle of the link chain in the well pit—Bob could not see two feet down in the gloom, but he could hear distinctly.

Some one far below had evidently seized the chain to ascend it.

Jack let it slip a foot and there was a splash.

"Won't let him get up, eh?" murmured Bob.

"Not till he talks."

"Will he talk?"

"That's to find out."

"How?"

"By questioning him, of course. I've been waiting for you to do that part of the programme. You see how we've got him? He can't get up. I'll duck him back into the water every time he tries it."

Bob recognized the queer complication clearly.

Jack certainly had the man in a close box.

There was no need of risk—no occasion of bringing him to the surface till they were ready. They could dictate terms, and at their leisure.

"They say truth is to be found at the bottom of a well," remarked Bob. "Wonder if it's so about this one?"

"Try, and find out."

"I will. Hey, you!"

Bob got flat and pressed his face over the well curb.

There was a rustling, and an utterance of discomfort, pain, confusion or alarm—Bob could not trace which.

"Do you want to get out of here?" he called down.

"Yes," came the merest flutter.

"Then answer!"

"What?"

"Who are you?"

No reply.

"A child was stolen at Riverdale—thrown into a balloon, has vanished," continued Bob.

There was a poignant cry from below, but quickly checked, quickly dying down to a muffled utterance.

"He knows it," whispered Bob to Jack, "that's sure! He's concerned in that affair. Again, down there!" hailed Bob. "What was you doing with a mummy's head?"

Rustling ensued, a pained gasp, the chain rattled.

Like a rat in a trap, the captive struggled, then subsided again helplessly.

"Jack, this is kind of cruel!" suggested Bob.

"He's got to talk before I let him out! I'll take no risks," pronounced Jack, determinedly.

Bob tried it again.

"You've got to explain things," he called, renewingly, "got to—hear? You can't come up till you do, if it takes all night. Do you mind?"

There was no reply.

"Do you hear?" persisted Bob. "I say, Jack!"

Bob drew out a match, flared it, held it far down the bricked-up space.

"What you fooling about?" queried Jack.

"Fooling! Something's wrong down there!"

"No, he's obstinate."

"Hurt, Jack," corrected Bob—"upon my word, I believe that flare showed no man!"

"You mean he's gone under water?"

"Let go and sank."

Jack acted troubled.

Neither had a mask lantern and Bob's matches were a poor illuminant.

"Hold the gearing firm," spoke Bob, abruptly.

"Going down?"

"Yes, sir!"

Jack braced. Bob reached under, caught the two wet chains—clamped them in a firm grip, disappeared from view.

Hollow but mandatory, up came a muffled call a minute later:

"Jack!"

"Hello?"

"He's a lump of lead."

"Hurt?"

"Or fainted, and half drowned."

"The deuce!"

"Dead weight. You'll have to pull us up."

"Both?"

"It's got to be that way."

"Get your hold."

"Got it."

"All ready, then!"

It was no easy task for Bob to clutch his way up the chains, light weight as his burden was.

Jack could give the aid of a braced foot only, for he had to hold the crank or the gearing would have unwound.

Bob finally got his charge out safe and followed, but badly flustered.

The man was moaning and muttering.

"Limp as a rag—couldn't help himself a bit," reported Bob. "One arm broken."

"Pshaw!"

"Two cuts in the head, and they're bad ones."

Bob examined the stranger closely. Jack looked very serious.

"Run down another hospital patient, it seems!" he muttered. "Can't you rouse him a bit?"

"I'll try."

Bob labored over the sufferer for some

moments. Jack, watching proceedings intently, knew that he had succeeded at last.

"Speak to us!" Bob said—"friends, you know."

"No!" came a faint murmur.

"Yes, I tell you!"

"I have no friends—two years in a living tomb—broken, baffled, beaten!"

Bob drank in the words eagerly.

"And the child!" moaned the sufferer. "My dear brother's child—the one little life between that—that monster and an inheritance!"

All this was spoken vaguely, dreamily.

Bob recognized this, tracing that the man was scarcely sensible of the fact that he had auditors.

"But the head—the mummy's head!"

The sufferer tried to rise, for he uttered the words with quite a scream.

"Gone, too—I got it, made off in his buggy, some one chased me. Let me see? In a bag. Robbed. Fell—but just before I saw him driving back in the buggy looking for me, looking for me!"

The speaker lapsed. Bob saw that he was sinking.

"The head—go on, tell us about it!" he ventured to suggest in low, persuasive tones, directly in the man's ear.

"Eh?" dreamily muttered the other, but very faintly. "I got it. Mine! But he has found it—oh, surely, he was after it!"

"Who is 'he'?"

The man muttered unintelligibly.

"And if he has? A mere mummy's head, a dried up nothing!" insinuated Bob.

"That is so!" half deliriously breathed the man—"true, true! So near death, it is, indeed, nothing. Dross, but—every tooth in that mummy's head is stored with a gem worth the crown of a kingdom!"

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE DARK.

"Get it!" spoke Jack Burton instantly.

The man had convulsed once and lay like lead.

"He means something or nothing!" spoke Bob.

"Find out which."

"Every tooth in that head holds a gem worth the crown of a kingdom!"

"He said so."

"And the 'he' he so fears, hates, who has so wronged him, is in the vicinity!"

"Found the horse we scared loose and returned this way with it, I should judge."

"Then—"

"Get it!"

"This man here needs instant attention?"

"So, hurry!"

Bob Ferret sped from the spot. Ideas were thronging actively in his excited mind.

Affairs were assuming sensible coherency of shape.

A villain had shut this man up for two years—had sought the life of his dead brother's child because it stood in the way of an inheritance.

What figure the mummy's head cut in the matter Bob could not tell.

He determined, however, to test the delirious sufferer's boast of its opulence, and then fathom the further secret of its ownership.

Bob came back to the fence where he had so carelessly left the bag and head.

Bag and head were gone!

"The mischief!" panted Bob.

Who had taken it—one of the academy boys? Had it tilted free and rolled somewhere?

Bob eagerly experimented on the latter suggestion.

"Keep still!" sounded a sudden voice.

"Hold on!" cried Bob, sharply.

From some bushes he was about to scour for a trace of the missing object a gun barrel poked out.

"You come with me, young feller!" spoke the owner of the weapon.

A brawny young farmer presented from covert.

"Come where?" demanded Bob.

"Up to dad. You fellers have just carried things a leetle too fur to-night!"

"What fellows?"

"As if you didn't know! Half the patch has been raided. I'm in airnest—I'll shoot if you run!"

Bob discovered that he was taken for one of the raiding party.

"My friend," he said, "you're mistaken."

"Guess not!"

"I stole none of your melons!"

"G'wan!"

"I didn't."

"Can't stuff me! What you come here for? Guess I've got eyes. I was watching. You came right up to that fence post."

"What of it?"

"For a melon."

"No."

"For a bag and melon."

"I say no."

"I say yes, for it was there ten minutes ago."

"How do you know?" demanded Bob quickly.

"Saw it—saw a fellow take it. You came too late, but you was after the same thing. Don't deny it. Facts is facts. March—to dad!" Bob was all aglow now with anxiety.

Some person had taken the bag, and this fellow had seen him.

Bob ran his hand down into his pocket. He bunched out a fistful of coin.

"Going to pay, eh?" grinned the gunner. "That's the ticket!"

"Not for any melons—I didn't steal any."

"What for, then?"

"Tell me!" pressed Bob, "and tell me quick! Some one took the bag off that post?"

"I saw him."

"A boy?"

"A man."

Bob grew more excited than ever.

"Where did he go?"

"I was just coming up. I yelled. He put."

"Which way?"

Road yander. Had a horse and ker-ridge. Jumpt in. Get up! gone!"

"What kind of a vehicle?"

Bob's voice fairly trembled. He was guessing hard.

He knew that his guess had struck the truth at the fellow's reply.

The same involved a perfect description of the vehicle he and Jack had run down an hour previous—the buggy to the

rear axle of which dangled Buff Hutchinson's signal necktie.

Bob fired a few quick questions to receive speedy replies.

"My friend," he said, adding a silver dollar to the pile of change, "that's for you."

"Pussonally?"

"Personally."

"Oh, thanks!" expanded the bumpkin.

"For a favor."

"Name it."

"You know where the house burned down?"

"Right across the brush rise?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"Go there. At the well you'll find a young fellow my size, and a man, hurt."

"What hurted him?"

"Fell into the well, accidentally. You tell the young fellow what you just told me, about that bag—tell him I've gone to hunt the man who took it."

"Pears to me yo're tur'bly sot up about a melon in a bag."

"Never mind. Will you do it?"

"For a dollar—likely!"

"Go on, then."

Bob Ferret went on himself. He flung everything past to the winds.

A new spur urged him to prompt, resolute and decisive action.

The controlling figure in the mystery under play was the man who had just taken that bag.

Bob was sure that this personage was no other than the man referred to by the victim of the well accident.

His possession of the alleged gem-stored mummy head gave entire color to the claim that it was valuable.

Bob reasoned that somehow its recent possessor had got it from the villain's home.

Certainly, according to his own words, he had brought it to Riverdale in the villain's buggy.

To that buggy Buff's necktie was attached.

It was therefore presumable that Buff was at the other end of the line.

To follow the man making off in the buggy was to arrive just at that point,

and for that end Bob ardently pressed forward.

To detail the chase of the ensuing two hours would be to recite a series of energetic spurts of catching up, of falling behind.

The end of that time, however, found Bob Ferret with his point made.

The horse and buggy had come to its first halt at the edge of the freight shed of a straggly railroad town.

Here the man Bob had shadowed stepped out.

The latter had dodged under the shelter of the open platform.

He peered keenly. The mummy's head was not in evidence, and against the platform lantern's light Bob could make out no suspicious bulge about the fellow's attire.

"Has he left it in the buggy!" murmured Bob. "Surely that—just that!"

Bob Ferret felt that he had done a big thing, as the instant its driver passed the corner of the freight shed, he ran to the vehicle.

His fingers thrilled and tingled as they swept a familiar object.

"Got it!" breathed Bob, ardently, and dodged back into covert again.

He had recovered the mummy's head, and he marveled at the man's carelessness in leaving it out of his sight for a single instant if its vaunted richness was a fact and he knew of it.

"Hey! that you, Mr. Wolfe?" sounded a voice.

"Name fits!" muttered Bob, listening keenly.

"It's me," came the response. "I wanted to see about trains to-morrow."

"All right. But them bushes came today for your garden."

"Well, send them up any time," came the careless response.

"Take them with you, can't you? Save me a lot of bother. I'll put them in the buggy. They don't take up a great sight of room."

"Very well."

There was a swishing, dragging sound.

The next minute an overalled man dumped the bushes in question into the buggy.

They were uncased in bagging, and quite bulky.

Evidently the two now proceeded to the depot building farther along.

Bob's eyes dilated with rapid thought.

The recovery of the mummy's head was by no means all he wanted of this Mr. Wolfe.

He must learn where he lived, if Buff was there, the true essence of his sinister interest in the man injured at the well, in the infant carried away in the balloon.

Bob discerned from Wolfe's careless tones that he was not very much interested in the bushes at present.

He felt it safe to venture a free ride, close company with the man he had raced till he was fairly tired out.

Two minutes later, when Wolfe showed up, Bob was inside the bagging surrounding the bushes, stowed safely out of sight.

He was not sorry he had stolen a lift, for the vehicle was driven fully three miles further on.

He could not peer out to see where he was, as a gate clanged.

Then a stable door was slid back, and Bob crouched, ready for action, if need be.

The horse was unhitched, led to its stall. Wolfe left the stable.

To Bob's surprise he never disturbed the bushes nor did he search for the mummy's head.

"Either he don't know its real value, or he trusts to attending to it in the morning," vaguely thought out Bob. "Am I alone in this stable—safe to come out?"

Bob waited a brief spell. No sounds reached him, and he got free of the bush bagging.

The first thing he did as he reached the floor was to half stumble over something.

It was a lantern.

"Good enough!" murmured Bob, groping for it. "Now to find out if the man hurt at the well was really romancing, or if, really, 'every tooth is laden with a gem worth a royal crown.'"

Bob fumbled about cautiously till he reached an empty stall.

This would shade the lantern light from outside, for it was closed in like a box except at one end.

He snapped a match, set the wick low, and pressed close over the bag.

Tilting it, he tipped out the mummy's head.

"Safe and sound," he murmured. "Goodness!"

Bob shocked with a jerk—his eyes turned positively dismal.

The boast as to its opulence was practically verified, as was, further, its late careless treatment by the man Wolfe.

It was the same head Bob had first seen at the melon patch, but its aspect was changed.

There was a big gap about the dry, leathery face.

The mummy's teeth had been extracted.

"Oh, confound it!" muttered Bob, and not at all cautiously.

"Hello!" broke in a sudden voice—"what you got there, Bob Ferret?"

It was the voice of missing Buff Hutchinson.

CHAPTER VII.

SHUT IN.

Nick Carter's missing young detective had certainly spoken, and Bob Ferret came upright with a shock.

"Buff!" he gasped.

"That's who!" came a mysterious reply.

"Where?"

Bump! bump! bump!

There was a jangle overhead. Bob felt a flicker of dust. Then he espied a knot hole.

An eye was glued to it—he could guess whose.

"I've got the husk—some one else the kernel!" muttered Bob, "but—Buff! Come down."

"Guess not!" tipped through the knot hole.

"Why not?"

"Got some jewelry on."

"That's the secret of your absence from school?"

"Pretty near—you come up."

Bob guessed that Buff was in some helpless fix.

He found it to be so, as, shading the lantern under his coat, he ascended the loft stairs.

A steel belt was locked to Buff's waist.

A strong chain ran from it to a heavy metal ring in a rafter.

"Well!" commented Bob—"what got you here?"

"What brought you?"

"Necktie."

"Aha! I hardly dared hope. First day I was here they chained me down stairs. I decorated the buggy. That led you?"

"Primarily, yes."

"Roxy?"

"No trace."

"Too bad! Bob, what do you know?"

"I'll tell you when I get you loose."

"Going to do that?"

"First thing."

"Good thing! Try it, but what with?"

"I'll find something."

Bob did. He went below and investigated beam chinks and rafter corners.

A heavy wrench, a narrow chisel, some horse nails, a screw driver, comprised his kit of tools when he returned.

It was no easy task, but Bob got the steel belt free after half an hour's probing and prying.

"That's better!" breathed Buff relievedly. "I'm brief. Followed the fellow who stole the child at Riverdale."

"Yes."

"He ran me a swift race. Passed some one waiting for him—expected to get the child, I theorized."

"I see."

"Hurled him a hurried explanation and bolted out of sight. I took the next best trail."

"Of his evident accomplice?"

"Employer. Name, Wolfe."

"I know. Lives here?"

"Exactly, and here I locate him, ferreted too close, got nabed, refused to give an account of myself, and have been studying the crowd since."

"There's a crowd, then?"

"Quite a bunch—and hard ones, I tell you!"

"What are they up to?"

"Haven't you found out yet?" pro-pounded Buff.

"The merest hint. This Wolfe is a villain——"

"Is he! Listen. He's trustee of two heirs."

"Two?"

"Heirs of an old antiquarian who once lived here. One a man named Ross. Quite a fortune left him—two years since. They put him out of the way."

"Where?" interrogated Bob.

"That I don't know, but in some hard hands," continued Buff. "The second heir is that infant. Father and mother died. This was their property, this place. If the child dies, Wolfe is next heir."

"Ross," resumed Buff, "escaped from wherever he was kept. Made for his brother's child, got it, put it in charge of that pugilist till he got some of his fortune from Wolfe."

Bob had an idea of his own concerning the mummy head now.

Ross probably knew what it contained—treasures of his antiquary legator.

The latter owned a mummy. Ross had entered the place, beheaded it, made off in Wolfe's buggy.

Between them the two young detectives soon formed a coherent theory as to all that had occurred and the motives involved.

"Pretty plain sailing, I call it now," observed Bob.

"We want to be cautious—Wolfe has a good many friendly visitors."

Cautious the two young detectives were, yet Bob felt bold, sanguine, satisfied, as they reached the open air.

A dark building filled the front of the grounds, with two extending ends.

It was closely shuttered, but running up to the top attic story of one wing was a ladder.

Bob studied where it ended.

"Pigeons up there it looks," he said to Buff.

"Attic?"

"Evidently."

"Suppose we get up and work down?"

"Anything to get into the house."

Bob began the ascent of the ladder, Buff following close.

They had passed the second story and were very near the top, when the ladder lifted with them.

"What's happened!" shot out Bob, looking back and down.

"Spotted!"

"Two of them!"

"It's a tumble."

It was a terrible one.

A flashing sight the two aloft had of moving forms below.

Then as the ladder was pulled violently outward they could only cling and fall.

Bob struck, bruised, half stunned—Buff lay totally insensible.

Two brawny fellows were upon the former before he could fairly recover wits and strength.

They made brief work of securing him. Ten minutes later in the same stall where Bob had first discovered Buff, the twain lay bound hand and foot.

Buff did not recover sensibility for some time.

"They got us, eh?" he projected, ruefully, soon as he discovered that Bob was with him.

"Looks so, don't it?"

"Are we alone?"

"Won't be long. Those two fellows called Wolfe, after seeing to our safety."

"What did he say?"

"To take us where they had Ross for two years."

"Ugh! that sounds ominous. 'The fellows went away to get 'the wagon.' "

Wheels grated outside. The stable doors were opened.

A vehicle was backed in—then the two young detectives were lifted and deposited inside a queer vehicle.

There was a fast, jolting drive.

At the end of an hour the wagon halted.

Bob made full use of his eyes as they were lifted out.

They were taken up a pair of stairs and into a lighted room.

Here a big, brutal-faced fellow, carrying an enormous bunch of keys, arose from a bench and glared at them.

"Two more?" he growled.

"Choice ones," replied one of the two escorts.

"From——"

"Wolfe."

"Then he wants them taken care of?" insinuated the monster, with a hideous grin.

"Best you know how."

The fellow selected a key.

A grin of cruel significance covered his hard face.

"We'll give them company as an introduction," he chuckled.

He led the way from the room down half a dozen stone steps and up to a doubly-barred door.

The two men had untied the ropes about the feet of Bob and Buff so they could walk.

Resting them near to one another, the captives found an opportunity to exchange a few brief words.

"What's coming, Bob?" whispered Buff. "Something tough!"

"Looks so, but—"

"I guess what the place is—I know where Ross was kept for two years now."

"What—where?"

"A private insane asylum!" answered Bob.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TEST OF GRIT.

"Make ready!" spoke the man with the keys.

He gave one of them a grinding turn in the great lock as he spoke.

"We're ready," nodded Wolfe's two minions in unison.

Each seized his respective captive.

Open came the door.

Only darkness hovered beyond its portals—past it went Bob with a swing.

Buff landed on top of him, the door was shut, locked, and a gruff, harsh laugh mingled with retreating footsteps.

"What now?" whispered Buff, crawling free of his battered companion.

"Get free, now!" answered Bob, promptly.

"What have they thrown us into?"

"Big dark room, floor covered with straw, from the feeling."

"And the sounds."

"That's so."

Heavy breathing was audible—that made by more than one person.

Bob began to bite at the ropes encircling his hands—Buff followed his example.

Both were tearing diligently and effectively at half parted strands when there was a sharp snap and then a flare.

Perhaps ten feet up a door was opened that was a mere stairless break in a blank wall.

Through it glared a bright light from the room beyond.

Bob curiously, Buff with a look of misery and horror combined, glanced about their new prison place.

A grim spectacle greeted their vision.

Upon the dank, fetid straw at one side of the room, each one chained to an iron ring in the solid stone wall, were half a dozen gaunt, unkempt human beings.

They stirred and groaned as disturbing light flooded the apartment.

From their wretched forms and faces the glances of the young detectives instantly veered to the aperture above so suddenly opened. There stood the big brutal fellow who had admitted them to this den of horrors.

His gloating eyes sought them out, and he chuckled fiendishly.

"How's your quarters?" he jeered.

The two captives simply continued to stare, wondering what was coming next.

"Incurables!" continued the brute, jerking his thumb at the prostrate beings, some of whom sat up, stared wildly, and began to mumble incoherently.

"They'll give you a dance!"

The fellow retreated from view with the words.

He returned, bearing a small tea kettle.

He had evidently just lifted it from a stove, for steam exuded from its spout.

Leaning over the edge of the doorway, the miscreant began to fling the water in spurts.

It must have been a favorite amusement with him, for he aimed so true that every scalding jet struck its destined mark.

One by one the beings recumbent sprang up with yells and shrieks of pain.

The room was a babel in an instant—there was a horrible clanking as the frenzied, tortured beings strained at their chains.

"Now then!" roared the fellow, with a great guffaw.

Again he retreated, to summarily return.

"What's he at?" murmured Buff.

"Get free!" ordered Bob, preparing for the worst.

The man had now focused the attention of the chained patients.

They whimpered, shrank, yet glared ferociously up at the master they had learned to dread.

"Catch! drum on those two!"

The fellow threw down a bundle of clubs.

"Ha! ha!" he roared—"now make those fellows dance—murder!"

Bob had just snapped the last rope fibre at his wrist.

To the soulless wretch a mishap had come, quick and startling.

He had stepped where the drippings of the tea kettle had fallen to the floor.

Over the sill of the doorway he shot.

In some way he clutched it. There, bellowing, helpless, he dangled.

He made a strenuous effort to lift himself.

"Buff!" cried Bob, his eyes blazing with hope and ardor.

"Here!"

"Follow!"

"Free—lead!"

Bob dashed through a sortie of swinging clubs.

He ran at the dangling man.

Up him as if he was a rope, acrobatic Bob Ferret made a run.

He was afraid the man would let go, but he dared not trust himself among the beings he had so tormented.

He quivered, shook, roared.

"Made it!" cheered Buff. "Now then, Bob!"

His comrade was gliding swiftly, investigatingly, about the apartment they had reached.

Bob found readily what he wanted, for it was a veritable torture chamber.

A dozen gags, cruel as spiked horse bits, lay on a shelf.

"Muffle that bawler!" ordered Bob, briskly tossing one to Buff.

He himself selected a pair of handcuffs. These and the gag were promptly applied.

"Now, drag him up."

They hugged the white-faced, trembling fellow to safety.

"Stand up!" ordered Bob, sternly.

He had armed himself with an instrument of torture—a double-pointed steel bar.

"Lead the way out of here," he continued, prodding the monster till he squirmed in voiceless agony.

The man dared not disobey. He marched up to a cabinet.

Bob opened it to find the bunch of keys.

It took them ten minutes to get out through as many steel-guarded doors.

When the open air and sure freedom were gained, Bob tripped their escort.

His feet were secured, and he was thrown upon a stony, crockery-mixed heap of refuse.

"Let him reflect on that bed!" spoke Bob, grimly. "As to his victims—there's urgent business on hand just now, but we'll break up that haunt of iniquity before many hours are over our heads!"

Bob had lost his bearings—he had reached Wolfe's home muffled in bagging, he had left it in a close vehicle, but Buff got an idea of location.

As they passed a cross-roads tavern they hurried their gait anew—with in, drinking at a table, were the two men who had conveyed them to the asylum.

"We'll find Wolfe alone," predicted Bob. "It's short work, Buff."

They reached Wolfe's place at the end of an hour.

They advanced cautiously to the deep porch.

"Say!" sharply ejaculated Bob.

"Hello!" chorused Buff.

"The door's open!"

"Look at that window—both shutters torn to flinders!"

"And the lights broken. Why, looks like a riot here!"

"Get back!"

Snap!

Fire!

Some powerful force shot a match across the porch.

Its lucifer end hit the siding and there was a flash.

Snap!

Flare!

Bob stood stock still, puzzled, the momentary illumination showed Buff's face anxious.

"Who are you?" spoke a gruff voice.

"Dempsey—Tug Dempsey!" cried Bob, quickly.

He instantly recognized the tones of the man he supposed to be in the hospital, sightless, at Riverdale.

"Ferret?"

"And a comrade."

"Good!"

The pugilist came mysteriously forward.

Now he snapped one at short range and let it burn.

In its rays he inspected the two young detectives, to be sure of them.

The same flare revealed his own face to Bob.

One optic was shaded.

Tug Dempsey, champion heavy-weight, had but one eye.

But that one eye was terrible!

CHAPTER IX.

ON HAND!

"How did you come here?" was Bob's surprised query.

"Where else would I be?" demanded the pugilist.

"But you were in the hospital—"

"I'm going it on one eye, see? and—"

"But—"

"They patched up me one eye. Was I wild to get on de trip? See me! Hunted yer pal, and found him just as he was starting out."

"And the man we all seem to be after?"

"Wolfe in name—wolf in nature!"

"You've got it!"

"Sloped. De little bunch of daisies said he must have seen us coming."

"The what?"

"De little beaut, wid eyes dat shine like!"

A form flitted into view beyond the shadows of the porch.

"Roxy!" uttered Buff, explosively.

Bob was so rattled at the unexpected appearance that he even forgot joy.

A twitter like a bird note sounded.

"Dat was de toot to start. On deck, me little lady!" sang out the big pugilist.

Nick Carter's girl detective simply advanced far enough to see that there was a

movement of following her—then she put back the way she had come.

"Roxy!" called Buff, breathlessly, running after.

"Buff!"

"You here—"

"Don't pester with questions—business, just now!"

"But—" Bob, getting abreast, managed to put in.

"Up—down."

"The balloon?"

"Into a swamp—one day to get out, one to stow that precious little jewel in safe hands, one to get here," narrated Roxy.

"Yes, but—here!"

"There was a letter in a locket on the child telling just about here, and the man who lives here, so—Jack!"

They took up Jack at this point of their course.

"Here!" she halted, with a little gasp for breath.

She had come to where a steep ridge looked down on a sheet of water, glowing in the moonlight.

It was where the river widened to a lake.

In its centre, down stream five hundred yards, was a little island.

"Look!" spoke Roxy, quickly. "I traced Wolfe to where you see the little yacht. It's his. He's started up the stream."

"He's on board?" queried Jack.

"No," dissented Roxy, "he took a skiff, rowed to the island."

"What for, now?" asked Dempsey.

"I don't know, but—he's coming back."

"To the yacht!" cried Jack. "How shall we get down to intercept him?"

"The break to the shore is way beyond there."

They could see the man they were after, rowing rapidly away from the island and toward the yacht.

Bob fancied he traced his motives.

Wolfe must have been scared into flight by the coming of so many enemies.

Unexpected acquisition of the gems incited him to fly before he got into trouble.

He had visited the island for some purpose—now he was urgently making for

the launch that could soon carry him swiftly away.

"He'll reach it before we get down!" hurried Jack.

"Mustn't!" spoke Bob.

"Shan't!" projected the prize fighter.

As the latter spoke he brushed all hands aside.

There stood near the edge of the spot and directly over the yacht a great stone.

It was detached, but though its base rounded in, it stood firm as an iron-anchored monument.

Toward it the pugilist strode—he peered below, estimated with his eye.

Bob had been taking in the entire situation. He whispered a direction to Buff.

The latter promptly disappeared.

Unless Wolfe regained his yacht and steamed away, he had his choice of two things.

He could return to the island and entrench himself there.

He could row up or down stream.

On this side, Bob felt sure, they could prevent a landing, a dive for cover.

To patrol the opposite shore and block escape that way, he had sent Buff back to where the banks dipped and the stream narrowed.

"Spile him!" abruptly ordered the pugilist.

He had set his back against the great stone as he spoke.

"What are you suggesting, Mr. Dempsey?" queried Jack.

"Spile him!"

"That man, Wolfe?"

"The felly coming—yep. Give it a boost!"

"Hold on!" interfered Bob, "is there any need—?"

"He's guessing—de guy below—he's making tracks fast for de yacht!" declared the pugilist, excitedly. "Do youse hear me? Jine in!"

"You can't budge that stone—?"

"Can't I?"

The great giant actually moved it—the immense mass of rock tilted slightly.

"All hands!"

Bob knew the fellow's persistency—perhaps, after all, it was as well to dis-

able the yacht, and this seemed an easy way.

"Push!" breathed hard the pugilist.

Jack lent his burly aid—Bob got a pushing purchase, as well.

"I'm only a girl, but I'll help," volunteered Roxy.

"Gals count!" puffed the straining giant.

"Leastwise, your sort," he added.

"Now, den!"

"One!"

The great boulder moved.

"Two!"

It began to rock.

"T'ree!"

It rolled. Tremendous strength did more than calculated.

Over the ledge it went—hurtling hissing as it fell.

Crashing it struck the launch below squarely.

"Wolfe will do no more sailling in that craft—?" began Bob.

His tones dropped to a suddenly hushed gasp.

His face, excited with exultation, expressed a wild dismay.

He looked around and then, almost reeled under a numbing shock.

"Where's Roxy!" he gulped.

Where, indeed?

The startled Bob looked around. Then down.

The stone had gone down, but Nick Carter's girl detective had gone down with the stone.

CHAPTER X.

THE LAST DITCH.

The man rowing for the yacht turned sharply and rowed back to the island.

He had traced the cause of its destruction, and his head was now constantly turned as though fearing a personal onslaught next.

Then there was a little crash, and he went tumbling forward.

The current and the force of his unmindful rowing had driven him against a sharp-pointed rock.

"Hah!" gloated the giant, aloft, who saw all this.

Wolfe now rowed a wobbly course fast as he could.

His boat was stove in, and he scurried to get to the island before it sank.

Bob stood staring below.

One thought, one dread, crushed him.

"Roxy!" he kept repeating in a pained, apprehensive way—"Roxy!"

Jack had left the spot on a run, evidently headed for the river shore below by the only course open—a roundabout one.

"Say! she didn't go over?" interrogated Dempsey, alarmedly, waking up to the cause of Bob's startling attitude for the first time.

"Yes!" gasped Bob, hoarsely.

"Mebbe not?"

"There's her hat—floating!"

"Yes, but isn't that herself?"

Bob stared, almost unable to believe his sight.

Roxy had gone below, slipping and following the stone—that was evident.

But Roxy had landed in safety, for she came into view now before Bob's very eyes.

Those eyes dilated wonderingly.

"Whatever is she up to!"

"Something cute!"

There was Roxy. Somewhere on the shore she had found a little skiff.

Just as Wolfe stumbled out of his water-logged craft over at the island, Roxy, in this other one, shot out into mid-stream.

She bent to the oars, looking neither to the right nor the left.

That she had a definite purpose in view, however, Bob felt sure, so he did not hail her.

"She's not going to tackle dat fellow on de island alone?" muttered the staring giant.

"She's got an idea."

"De boat's upset!"

"She upset it."

"She's screamin' fer help!"

"That's her ruse."

"Say! I see! Powers o' war! dat's slick, if it goes!"

Roxy had, indeed, ventured a "slick" thing.

Bob could trace but one motive in her impetuous new appearance on the scene.

Wetted through by her recent drop,

Roxy did not shrink from a second watery douse.

Discovering the skiff, resolved to get to the refuge on the island first, she had impressed it into service.

The appearance of a girl rowing down stream would be regarded as less suspicious by Wolfe than that of a man or a boy.

Roxy had acted, as if she never thought of stopping at the island till half past it.

Then came that tip-over.

It was executed so deftly, that if Wolfe was watching he must have regarded it as purely accidental.

To give further apparent genuineness of her dilemma, Roxy now floundered and shrieked like a terrified school girl never on the water before.

"Save me!" she screamed.

Wolfe appeared at the island edge.

He did not offer to help her—he was not of the kind to put himself out for anybody.

But he was engrossed in the incident, and kept shouting directing advice.

Roxy made half-a-dozen drowning feints.

When she stumbled ashore, it seemed that she had escaped by the bare skin of her teeth.

"And she can swim like a fish!" chuckled Bob, to the gaping pugilist.

"What's she going to do next?" queried Dempsey.

Their attention was centred now on Wolfe.

Roxy stood dripping and bawling—she had gained the enemy's stronghold, and, Bob read, was keeping up her role till she thought out a way to benefit by her arrival.

Wolfe had run to his own skiff, now sunken to the water's edge.

He thrust a hand into its bow and groped, fishing up a coil of rope.

This he began to unwind rapidly.

"Going to tie de gal!" started Dempsey.

"Like to see him try it! No, he's after her boat."

This, upturned, was drifting. Wolfe, getting the rope uncoiled and looped, started a lassoing throw.

Missing, he dropped the rope and be-

gan pulling off his coat and kicking off his shoes.

"Going to swim for it!" muttered Dempsey.

"Looks so, but—Roxy!"

"Say, dis is a regular show!"

A brilliant side-play was thrown into the performance by Roxy just then.

The minute Wolfe dropped the rope—his back to Roxy—the girl detective stole up and seized it.

His coat half off, his arms uncomfortably akimbo, the startled scoundrel found himself done for.

The loop he had formed served its purpose in a way not intended.

The excited watchers ashore saw Roxy jerk the man flat.

Keeping him flat, she whistled as only Roxy could whistle the detective school urgency call.

"Now we're due!" pronounced Bob.

"Time, I should say! She's a good one!"

They made a run that necessarily took them out of view of the island and the interesting scene in progress there.

When they got down to the shore ten minutes later, Bob was the first to hail and discover Jack.

Day was dawning. Jack was just poling off in a float made of logs withed together.

"Hold on!" signaled Bob.

"Don't delay!"

Bob took a quick glance over at the island.

"She's safe!" he half crowed.

"Yes, but has to flounder the fellow around like a fish to keep him from getting away. Needs help."

"She'll soon have it!"

"Good-morning!"

Bright-faced as the sun, Roxy beamed on the trio as the log float neared her.

She took the luxury of waving an airy hand in welcome.

It cost her the victory.

Desperate Wolfe took advantage of Roxy's momentary distraction.

There was a jerk—the girl detective was pulled over, the rope slack, the villain expanded his arms.

Roxy was instantly on the alert, but a

second counted with a man right up to the jaws of justice.

Wolfe sped across the island. Bob and the others landed.

They came to the other side of the narrow body of land to see a head cleaving the water toward the opposite shore.

Roxy was stamping her foot with vexation.

Then she started and stared—the fugitive had paused, was beating water.

Buff blocked, just ahead, where thoughtful Bob had posted him.

Wolfe glared his hate at the two encompassing obstacles.

He started to swim down stream. Suddenly up went one arm.

"What's come?" shouted out Jack.

"Cramps!" laconically read the pugilist.

"He's gone under!"

Splash!

Bob had leaped in, struck out.

The man came up with a shriek.

It was muffled as he sank again.

Bob fairly cut the water.

Twice, three times under, and he was yet twenty feet away.

Bob knew what that meant—he dove like a dolphin.

Then the suspenseful trio on the island saw him come up tugging at a burden.

"He's got him!" muttered the pugilist.

"This way, Bob!" cried Roxy, as her hero pulled and panted into reach.

She seized a sapling to steady herself, bent with it and stretched out her hand.

Bob caught it, took its sturdy pull, and landed, dropping his inanimate burden.

Roxy swung to bound back with the tree, and fell instead.

She laughed at the mishap of a little splash into the water.

The tree came uprooted—she scrambled up to the others.

"Why, he's done for!" exclaimed Bob at that moment.

His hand was inside Wolfe's vest—over his heart.

Jack verified the discovery by a second examination.

The pugilist's eager ferocity died from his eyes.

"I owed him one," he spoke simply

and grimly, "but I guess de account's squared."

It was, so far as Wolfe was concerned. He would never plot again.

"It's saved him from the penitentiary," spoke Jack.

"But it won't save his accomplices!" interposed Bob. "Let's wind up affairs. The man who blinded our friend, Mr. Dempsey——"

"Tug, kid!"

"Well, you've made a brave tug of it!"

"Who wouldn't wid such a crowd—Nick Carter's crowd! It beats de world!" exuberated the pugilist.

"There's that horrible asylum den to break up, too—I'm determined on that!" spoke Bob, resolutely.

"That will have to follow, sure," assented Jack. "All this will be great news or our injured friend, Ross. This man's death makes his way easy hereafter."

"And Roxy's brave, better news of the rescued child will be the final drop in his

cup of happiness!" declared Bob, earnestly.

"And this!"

Roxy spoke with a spring.

Her quick eyes always everywhere, they were in the right place this time.

The sapling she had uprooted showed a handkerchief package protruding. She guessed as she grabbed it—she knew as she opened it.

"Look!" she spoke, simply.

All eyes were dazzled.

"The gems——" began Jack Burton.

"From the mummy's head!" cried Bob Ferret.

And the case was ended.

[THE END.]

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